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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the formation and operation of a professional book club for teachers. The Book Club was designed as a tool for professional development for teachers at a high school with approximately 3,000 students in Chicago, Illinois. The student body is diverse, with whites representing a slight majority. Twenty-seven teachers signed up for the Book Club, which met after school four times in the school year. Facilitating the Book Club helped the teacher/leader with her own professional development and helped her put her place in the school community into perspective. The informal leadership experience validated things the teacher knew intuitively without previous reflection. (Contains 35 references.) (SLD)

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Leading a Professional Book Club:

Staff Development to Build Understanding and Grapple with

Difficult Issues

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“I remember when the law changed and the city pool had to be integrated,” said one African-American teacher. “The city paved over the swimming pool rather than have Black and White children swimming there together.” “Didn’t you feel enraged?” I asked. “How can you deal with that?” “You learn to deal with it,” she replied, “or you couldn’t function. That kind of anger and rage can destroy you,” she said, accompanied by vigorous nodding from the other people of color. So went our discussion of racial identity development as we considered our first book, Beverly Daniel Tatum’s (1997) Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?, for our “Professional Book Club for a Community of Learners” at a large suburban high school in the Midwest.

This paper is an examination of the process I went through as I, an ordinary faculty member who aspired only to be the best practitioner I could be, never wanting to be an administrator, became an informal leader, sharing the responsibility of helping our school meet its goals. The purpose of the paper is twofold: it explicates my journey into staff development, and looks at why and how an educator might take on this charge; and then moves to explore the collective, shared, ongoing journey of the Book Club participants.

Context

I work in a high school of approximately 3000 students in suburban Chicago. The community is a melding of urban and suburban living. The population is diverse. The school serves students the slight majority of whom are White; the remaining students are Black, both African-American and Caribbean, with about 7% of the students Hispanic and a small number of others. There is diversity in the economic and social status of the students we serve as well. The multicultural aspect of our school is a driving force in setting the goals of the school. One of our clearly stated missions is to enhance the achievement of **all** students, with an emphasis on minority student achievement. Many in our community strongly agree with the idea expressed in “Equity Lessons from Detracking Schools” that schools should restructure and make reforms so that all students will reach high academic standards because of the cultural ideal that schools are responsible to all children. (Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa & Ray, 1997) Ours is a sophisticated community that in many cases recognizes the issues raised because of the diversity and tries to address them.

Professional Development Ethos

This project would not have been possible at all without the support of our Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and the Staff Development Coordinator. We have been able to order the books to peruse as possibilities,

and we have been able to order even expensive books for the whole group. The message we get is one of encouragement for helping faculty to get in touch with good professional literature. We are provided with refreshments, a necessity for teachers meeting for another 2.5 hours after the end of a demanding and busy school day.

I feel incredibly lucky to work in a school in which the powers that be value professional development and do not see leadership as the province of administrators only. As Mark A. Smylie and Anthony S. Bryk say, one of the components of good professional development "provides teachers opportunities to learn with other teachers." (Voice of the people, Monday, Feb.22, 2000, Chicago Tribune.) Our Book Club is one such opportunity.

In The Lifeworld of Leadership, we learn that "in successful schools, teachers work harder, are more satisfied with their jobs, and are more committed to the school and its work. These motivating conditions are present when teachers and others...have reasonable control over their work activities and affairs and are able to exert reasonable influence over work events and circumstances." (Sergiovanni, 2000, p.136) It is within this kind of environment, which promotes the idea of faculty members following up on new ideas that enhance teaching and learning, that I was motivated to begin the Book Club.

Under the auspices of the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, the professional development committee is chaired by an excellent science teacher who has always been a teacher leader, even before she was formally assigned to this position. She has done an outstanding job of coordinating the staff development program in which all teachers participate. We have what we call a B-day (as differentiated from regular or A-days) Staff Development program. From September to March there are several Monday mornings (B-days) when students do not start school until 9:40 and faculty have time to meet in small groups around a variety of issues. Half of these B-days are devoted to staff development and half are for departments to meet together. The rationale for these B-day staff development groups is best stated by Donaldson (2001) when he says, "Scheduled team and committee meetings are typically more fruitful than large or compulsory meetings. These small group sessions can more easily fit the parameters of effective collaborative groups than can large formal meetings. Their purpose is usually more clearly defined." (p.15) The B-Day meetings are compulsory, but the intention is to create a smaller, more intimate environment in which to wrestle with a variety of issues in which the participants are interested.

Another teacher leader, an outstanding English teacher, is in charge of Voluntary Staff Development. These are programs that are offered after

school hours. Some are facilitated by our high school personnel and others by outside experts. This is the ethos within which I created the Professional Book Club.

Rationale for Creating the Book Club

Thinking about how I could be an agent for change in the school while enjoying the reading and ensuing discussions that were occurring in the Interdisciplinary Studies M.Ed. program in which I was then enrolled, I conceived of the idea of a professional book club for a community of learners. As Lavuan Dennett in The Lifeworld of Leadership says, “The new culture includes a commitment to excellence and an acceptance, even appreciation, of change that assures us all that this school will keep becoming what it needs to be. We lead one another in the process of becoming.” (Sergiovanni, 2000, pp.132-134) As we read, digested and discussed in my master's program, I thought about the ideas presented by the various authors and tried them out in my daily work with students. The resulting discourse was energizing to me. I wanted to share the excitement and stimulation with my colleagues. Gloria Ladson-Billings says that the best teachers are "reflective and self-critical." (1999, p.107) I was eager for a cohort with whom to share the reflections and the passage of becoming.

To be truly reflective, we must be aware of the perspectives of others in addition to our own perspective. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991) I hungered for the opportunity to discuss with my cohort the substantive issues we deal with as educators, so that our various perspectives might help inform one another. I knew I had colleagues who had thoughts about such topics and might be interested in discussing them.

Willis D. Hawley and Linda Valli contend “that staff development is often ineffective because it ‘does not acknowledge or address the personal identities and moral purposes of teachers, nor the cultures and contexts in which they work.’” (1999, p. 133) Many staff development programs do not work because they tend to be one-shot workshops conducted by an expert from outside the school who talks at faculty rather than getting them actively involved in the process. Hawley and Valli propose a

new paradigm [for] staff-development [that] is a shared, public process; promotes sustained interaction; emphasizes substantive school-related issues; relies on internal expertise; expects teachers to be active participants; emphasizes the why as well as the how of teaching; articulates a theoretical research base; and anticipates that lasting change will be a slow process. (p. 134)

The Professional Book Club falls within the parameters of this new paradigm. It provides a forum for discussing topics with which we as educators grapple on a daily basis, but about which we often remain silent. Sometimes, we feel alone and isolated in dealing with these issues. The Book Club gives faculty and staff the opportunity to read the work of current researchers, theoreticians, and practitioners, to process the ideas and then to apply them to our own setting and practices. We are able to affirm the work of our colleagues and to make constructive suggestions as we share what we have tried and what has worked for us and why. We have the opportunity to review educational policies and methods in light of the latest pedagogical thinking. And, as we act and interact on our thoughts, we share in the responsibility of making our school the best it can be.

Getting Started

At the time I proposed the Professional Book Club for a Community of Learners, I had not read Roland Barth's (1990) Improving Schools from Within. In it, Barth states that people cannot become active learners when "learning implies deficiency," and "a community of learners implies that school is a context for everyone's lifelong growth..." (p. 46-47) Intuitively, these were the concepts upon which I based my own vision of a community of learners. At the time, I did not have a professional development plan. I just thought of

some books we could read. As the district staff developer and I planned the program, we decided the Book Club would meet four times each year after school for two-and-a-half hours per session. Those interested would receive one professional growth credit if they so chose. Because I think co-facilitation is preferable to one person leading a group, I asked a fellow social worker if she would be interested in co-facilitating. She agreed to do so.

Twenty-seven people signed up! We were thrilled and a little intimidated. While we had only three men, the group was diverse in several ways. We had Black, Latino and White faculty and staff. It was important to us to that the Book Club was available to everyone in the school. Therefore, we were especially pleased that we had several classroom aides and security staff as well as teachers and chairpersons from a cross section of departments including student services, science, math, English, world languages and physical education.

While we never explicitly said that a primary focus of the Book Club would be on diversity, that idea was clearly in my mind from the outset. One of my passions is equity in schools. In retrospect, I probably should have been more aware of that and more direct about it. My co-facilitator is Latina, which I now realize was a factor in my asking her because of the kinds of issues that I hoped we might address through our reading. I think, however, the first group

of people who signed up got the idea because the first book we read was Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? by Beverly Daniel Tatum. I further think those who signed up did so partly because of the book we chose.

The Tatum book is about issues of equity, race and social justice, issues about which I feel strongly. While it was inchoate at the time, and I am only now sorting out why I began this group, I think it was largely because I had discovered a new vehicle for discussing these pertinent and personal issues. I realized that reading about the ideas, experiences and conclusions of others and discussing them could be a non-threatening way of getting at difficult-to-address, complex yet very important issues. I was a teacher leader who wanted to “ facilitate [a] small group... formed with a common focus and purpose.” (Donaldson, 2001, p.86) Without being aware of it, I was, “seeking to change what is possible” by providing a place where teachers can read, digest, explore and reflect upon ideas that can spark change. (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999, p.388)

Leading the Group

As Donaldson says repeatedly, collective responsibility, collegiality, and collaborative purpose are of great importance. He shares that J. M. Burns observed, "Leadership can be accomplished...by leaders' stepping back and

facilitating authority and action in others.” (Donaldson, 2001, p.91) I believe we do this with the group. We start the discussions and make sure everyone has an opportunity to be heard, not always an easy task. Sometimes everyone wants to speak at once. Before we leave each time, we make sure that people who have not said anything have an opportunity to share. We find that some people are reticent about speaking up, but when asked have important contributions to make.

Robert Evans (2000) in "The Authentic Leader" talks about the qualities of an effective leader. He includes such qualities as inspiring trust and authenticity, which includes integrity and savvy. The authentic leader "who is aware of her basic inclinations, including her limitations, is already better equipped to compensate for the latter but is unlikely to dwell on them." (Fullan, ed., 2000, p. 302) I hope this is true of my co-leader and me.

Selecting the Books

In retrospect, I realize that we did not really have a plan for the books. That provided a wonderful opportunity for my co-facilitator and me. Every time we hear about an exciting book that might inform our practice, we order it for us to read as we decide on the next book. While we do elicit ideas from the group, they mainly look to us to make the suggestions. Usually, we suggest

several possibilities and tell them a little about each book, bringing the books in for perusal when possible. Then, we decide as a group.

For the second book the first year, we wanted to read something by Jonathan Kozol. We could not decide between Amazing Grace (1985) and Savage Inequalities (1991). When we polled the group, they decided we should read both for the following meeting. So we did.

In an effort to change the pace somewhat for the next book, we proposed reading some leading educational reformers. We chose The Right to Learn by Linda Darling-Hammond (1997), The Power of Their Ideas by Deborah Meier (1995), Horace's Compromise by Ted Sizer (1992), and A Time to Learn by George Wood (1999). Because reading all those books would be time-consuming, we decided that each person would choose which author to read and we would personalize the ordering of the books so each person could read the one he or she chose. Then, we shared with one another in the discussion. It worked out pretty well. These authors reference one another, which the group found interesting. They do espouse many of the same ideas, which made the discussion doable, as our focus was on the ideas. For the last meeting of that first year, we read The Real Ebonics Debate by Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit (1998) and Rodriguez's Hunger of memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (1983).

The second year, our first book was A Hope in the Unseen by Ron Suskind (1999). The first book of the year is decided on at the last meeting of the previous year, so that we can order the books in time for summer reading. We do schedule the first meeting of each year with enough time for new members to have a chance to read the book as well. Having taken to heart a teacher's comment that he wanted to move to some books that suggested solutions, we looked for such books. We had already decided on Ordinary Resurrections by Jonathan Kozol (2000) for our January book. For March, we chose Teaching in America: The Slow Revolution, by G. Grant and C. E. Murray (1999). For the fourth book of that second year, we read Other People's Children by Lisa Delpit (1995).

For our first book of the third year, we chose And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner-city High School Students by Miles Corwin (2001). Our next books were Learning By Heart by Roland Barth (2001), The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract, by Sizer and Sizer (1999), and The Mismeasure of Man, by Gould (1996), suggested by one of the science teachers in the group. For that discussion, we decided to focus on one chapter of the book, Chapter five.

Now in our fourth year, we began with Stories of the Courage to Teach by Sam M. Intrator (2002). Once we read that, people were interested in

reading Parker Palmer's The Courage to Teach (1998), so that was our second book. Our current book is Creating Emotionally Safe Schools: A Guide for Educators and Parents by Jane Bluestein (2001). We are planning to focus on "Part II: The Toolbox" for our discussion.

Perhaps not having a plan for the books ahead of time is not a weakness. It allows the final decision to be collaborative, an important factor in the ownership of the participants. It allows for the "trust, openness, and affirmation [that] are rooted in [the] more personal and professional relationships [of informal teacher leaders], making them strong enough for members to feel comfortable both shaping others' thinking and actions and 'being shaped' by them." (Donaldson, 2001, p.71) It also allows us to access books that are current and that we may not have been aware of at the beginning of the year. As we have gone through years of facilitation of this Book Club, I can see that we do have a purpose and objectives that drove the inception of the project even though I did not exactly realize it at the time. I also see that the flexibility that has been a byproduct of lack of planning has been valuable.

Dealing with Conflict

Florio-Ruane (2001) said that in her book group, the emotion generated in the discussion of Kozol's (1991) Savage Inequalities threatened the

continuation of the conversation. She felt that, as the hostess/facilitator, she had to "move away from conflict." She went on,

However, I seem to sacrifice discussion of an important issue in order to restore cooperative participation in the group...The dilemma for a teacher in such a situation might be that of managing argument and examination of difference within the ...medium of conversation and without risking its breakdown. (p. 113-14)

I have been in that role and struggled with that dilemma. It is so uncomfortable when people are passionate and they disagree. It can get ugly. Therefore, people tend to shy away from it. As Nieto (2000) says, "unintentional discrimination is practiced by well-meaning teachers who fear that talking about race will only exacerbate the problem." (p. 42) Yet, how can we ever deal with these "hot lava" (as Florio-Ruane calls them) topics if we always veer away from them?

It comes down to an issue of trust, I think. It is important to establish trust, to have people understand that they are not adversaries even if they see things differently and that it is OK to disagree. It seems to me that one of the roles of the facilitator is to help lay that kind of foundation before grappling with the difficult issues. Like the Japanese talk show hosts, Deborah Tannen (1999) speaks of, we can make an "effort to modulate conflicts and defuse the

spirit of opposition, but not the substance of disagreement." (p. 286) Being able to disagree and discuss differences about complex, involved and perplexing issues in order to grow, as well as to come to consensus about other issues, is what I mean when I talk about a community of learners. Florio-Ruane (2001) says it well:

What we can learn with peers and/or more experienced others (be they teachers who may be present at the table or authors who are present in their texts) is rooted in and related to our conversations. Implicit in the idea of such conversations is the development of a community within which learning from text can occur. (p.122)

What Have We Learned?

The book club has been successful in several ways. For one thing, most people come regularly, and many have continued to participate over the years. Unfortunately, we had to change the day after the first year, which meant that some people who planned to could not participate. We have also had new people join us each year, so the size of the group has stayed the same (about 27). We are delighted by the number of people who join us in this endeavor! The group remains diverse.

For another thing, the books have inspired interesting and informative discussions. At first the level of discussion was somewhat superficial. We

asked people for their personal responses and they began to share feelings and experiences as well as thoughts. In response to questions about our own racial identity development, people became more introspective and the level of discussion deepened. The honesty and depth of our discourse has allowed for empathy and understanding. One of our roles as facilitators is to model the level of introspection we hoped for in the group, although it was never explicitly stated. I shared how, as a Jew, I have thought about my own identity development. I talked about how I was sitting in the dentist's office when I was a child in middle school, leafing through a movie magazine while waiting for my appointment. My best friend had come with me. I was reading about Natalie Wood, one of my favorite actresses. Excitedly, I turned to my friend and said, "It says here that Natalie Wood is Jewish!" "Really?" she replied. "But she's so pretty!"

Several of the other White people talked about the fact that they really did not think of themselves in terms of a racial identity. My co-facilitator shared that when she was growing up as the darkest-skinned child in her Latino family, she was called "La Prieta," (the dark one) and the impact that had on her. The group took off from there. People come each time expecting an in-depth discussion. We usually begin by sharing our responses to the opinions, theories and suggestions of the author. Quickly, the dialogue becomes

personal in the sense that we share our own experiences as educators and as people. We weave a pattern of our personal experiences and the impact the ideas we are discussing have on the students in our school. The caring and concern evidenced and the questions raised are powerful.

Grappling with Difficult Issues

There is a genuine give and take and search for understanding among all of us. This was evidenced when we read The Real Ebonics Debate, by Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit (1998) and Hunger of Memory by Richard Rodriguez (1983). I suggested The Real Ebonics Debate, and one of the other group members suggested the Rodriguez book. We thought that it would be interesting to read them in juxtaposition to each other because they both deal with race, ethnicity, and language.

The discussion began with various people talking about their own experiences with language. We focused on the idea that the language with which a child is most comfortable is the language s/he first learns at home, as Lisa Delpit so eloquently said, "...the language they heard as their mothers nursed them and changed their diapers and played peek-a-boo with them...the language through which they first encountered love, nurturance and joy." (1998, p. 17) One of the group members told how she spoke only Greek until she went to school. She compared and contrasted her experiences to

Rodriguez'. She agreed with him that bilingual education is limiting and not necessary. Another person told about having been born in Germany and coming here as a young child knowing no English. She felt that she learned English by immersion when she entered school.

I shared a conversation I had with one of my students who speaks Jamaican Patois as her first language. We were talking about how being in the program we have for kids who come from the Caribbean was helpful to the students. This bright young lady said, "When I first came here I was afraid to talk in class because kids would make fun of my accent. In math class, I would say I didn't know the answer when I knew the answer, if it had a three in it because I said 'tree' for three, and the students would laugh. The teacher thought I wasn't a very good math student."

Our lively discussion revealed divergent views on bilingual education. Some people in the group felt strongly that kids must assimilate and not be "coddled" by bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Others felt equally strongly about the necessity of such programs. The passion people felt about wanting the students to be successful was palpable. Even though we disagreed on method, it was clear that we all had the best interests of the children at heart. It seemed that people were willing and able to listen to and to hear one another's points of view. I heard comments like, "I never

thought of that before.” And, “Hmmm. You may be right.” I do not know that anyone’s ideas changed drastically, but the discussion appeared to raise thoughtful questions in people’s minds.

Reflection in Action

The reading and discussions have had an impact on the way the Book Club participants relate to their students. Joseph A. Hawkins (1999) makes a case that racial disparities continue to exist because schools avoid discussions of ‘race-related’ issues. “School officials will do anything to avoid open and honest discussions about race. This action, however, clouds how we view conditions.” (p. 114). I do not think it is only school officials who have difficulty addressing the issue. It is an issue that many of us skirt, but it is the proverbial "elephant in the living room" that no one acknowledges, there for all to see, but unmovable because of denial. I feel strongly that we must acknowledge this elephant in order to move it, and move it we must. Over the years, I have tried to do things about it in my small sphere of influence. In a way, this endeavor is in Erik Erikson’s words “a leadership of ethics in action.” (Coles, 2000)

Although I had not previously thought of myself as a leader, I remain motivated by Donaldson (2001) when he said, “Leaders support the development of healthy working relationships every time they arrange for staff

to convene and participate with one another around issues significant to them.” (p.58) Institutional racism is an issue that is significant to me and to the others in the group. In discussing difficult issues, Florio-Ruane (2001) says, "What is interesting to discover in peer conversation is its potential to recycle questions thereby pushing discussion further and challenging participants to reason through difficult quests or problems." (p.120) While issues of social justice are **our** issues, the Professional Book Club for a Community of Learners is a format that could encompass many issues.

Effects on Staff

After each Book Club meeting, people linger to continue the discussion. We meet from 3:45-6:15, but often do not leave until much later. This shows that the folks who sign up for the Book Club are invested in it. That involvement has become clear to me from the comments and suggestions they make. For example, one math teacher suggested that we have a study guide for before we read a book to help us focus on the salient points. She volunteered to do a guide for the next book. Although that idea did not take off, we were pleased that she had that level of commitment to the process. As the first year progressed, people began making suggestions for books to be read.

The reading and discussion has had an impact on the way the participants relate to their students. A science teacher who had been in the

group the first year said, after we read Suskind's (1999) A Hope in the Unseen, he felt what we read had opened his eyes to some important issues about his students of color. Now, he wanted to read books that focus on where we go from here. A concern is that as we continue to offer the Book Club, we will have people who will have participated all along and read everything, while others will be coming in new. We could see this problem clearly when the teacher said he was ready to move on to the next step. **He** was, but others were not. That is a dilemma for my co-facilitator and me. We do not want that teacher to lose his clear momentum, but neither do we want the new people to miss out on the process he has been through.

It is a challenge to decide what books to read that will meet everybody's needs. Is that even possible? We sought a solution with the group. Our brainstorming resulted in a decision to read a variety of books and to give a list of the books read to date to new members so they can "catch up" on their own on the reading, if not the shared experience. One person suggested that as a prerequisite for joining the group, new members should read Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?, the book that started us all on this journey of understanding.

Learning by Heart by Roland Barth (2001) had a profound effect on several of our teachers. One teacher who has a mixed-level psychology class

shared that after she read Barth's book, she changed the way she taught her class. As a result of participating in the Book Club, she decided that her class would read a book together and that she would give all the students honors credit. She wanted to encourage them to participate in the discussion as a community.

We were delighted when our Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum was able to invite Roland Barth to visit our Book Club as a guest facilitator. What a wonderful opportunity for us! She arranged for him to visit in February 2003, so we reread his book for that meeting. It was wonderful to have so distinguished and accessible an educator/author share his ideas with us and listen to ours. That worked out so well that we are thinking of trying to make it an annual event to invite an author we have read to visit our Book Club.

The culminating activity for the second year, suggested by one of the members, was to write a letter to President Bush, accompanied by two of Jonathan Kozol's books, Savage Inequalities (1991) and Ordinary Resurrections (2000). In our letter, we asked him to please read these and other educational reform books as he makes his decisions about education. Group members are concerned about the high stakes testing and vouchers that President Bush and his administration are touting as solutions to the issues facing education today. As committed professionals, we disagree. We feel that the authors we have

read have sparked thoughts and questions in us that we would like policy makers to consider as well.

Conclusion: Growth of a Leader

Facilitating the Book Club has helped me put my own work and my place in the school community into perspective. It has engendered a tremendous amount of growth in me. In Donaldson's (2001) terms, I have come to see that I am a teacher leader, one who is positioned by his/her membership in the faculty to "establish a foundation of equality and assumed mutuality upon which [to] build." (p. 68) I do, as Donaldson says, "work at relationship-building and at holding firm to moral purposes and challenges, not at knowing solutions and compelling or persuading others to carry them out. [I] approach [my] daily work and the school's challenges as learning opportunities." (p. 144) Now, people come to me to ask me to contribute to staff development programs. My cohort recognizes my sincerity and my passion, even when they might not agree with me. I hope that I am, in the words of Robert Evans (1996), becoming an authentic leader. An authentic leader has a combination of genuineness and effectiveness. The values of authentic leaders include espousing personal ethics, having a vision, and believing in others. I find that this informal leadership experience has validated things I have known and done intuitively without having reflected on them.

Reflection, however, is an important piece to growing. It helps to make sense and meaning of the things we do. I feel affirmed from this experience. How I came to grow from informal professional development in my school coupled with the worthwhile experiences of the Book Club is a story I think worth sharing.

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